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English Learning Motivation of First-Year Students in Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA)

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Abstract

Studies have shown that motivation influences the learning of English as a second language (ESL) where it has not only increased students' drive in language learning but it also influenced their language performance. However, most of the first-year students in Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) were found to have low English performance. This study thus examined UniSZA students' motivation level in learning English and significant difference in their level of motivation in learning English in terms of gender. The sample for this study comprised of 112 first-year students of UniSZA. The data for this study were gathered through the adapted version of Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). The findings revealed that most of the students had high level of motivation and the difference between males and females in terms of their motivation level was significant. Interestingly, females were found to be more motivated than the males. It is hoped that the findings would help English instructors in their teaching as they can plan appropriate motivational strategies for both the male and female students to enhance their potential in learning English and thus increases their English performance.

Keywords: *English Performance, Gender Differences, Motivation, Second Language Learning.*

1. Introduction

Language ability is an important aspect of second language learning (SLL) and some might think that those who acquired the second language (L2) within a short period of time possessed language ability which others might not have. Paradis (2011) however claimed that the variation of L2 outcomes was influenced by factors such as language aptitude, age, L2 exposure; first language (L1) typology and the richness of L2 environment. Mahadi and Jafari (2012) on the other hand claimed motivation as one of the important factors affecting L2 learning. Motivation according to Gardner (1985) is a combination of efforts; desire to achieve the goal of learning the language and also favourable attitudes towards learning the language. Gardner believed that language learners which have the desire to learn the language and put the effort in learning a language while having a positive attitude towards the language is considered as having the motivation in learning the language.

Motivation was claimed to have greatly affected the learners' SLL and Muftah and Rafic-Galea (2013) claimed that motivation was one of the strongest predictors in driving language learning success. A study by Petrides (2006) revealed that motivation was definitely a crucial factor in language learning and the material selection for teaching process must consider students' motivation level to ensure successful language learning. Additionally, a study by Rifai (2010) has uncovered interesting finding where the study revealed that students with high motivation level are more proficient in English compared to those who have low motivation level. This suggested that students with high motivation in learning English have greater chances in become more proficient in English compared to those with low motivation level. Regrettably, the first-year students of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) have been identified to have low English performance based on their university's English courses results.

This study was hence conducted to identify the levels of motivation in learning English among first-year students of UniSZA. It was also designed to identify the levels of motivation in learning English of the students based on gender as this study aimed to identify any significant difference in the levels of motivation in learning English between male and female students. This is due to the possible influence of gender towards motivation and also students' SLL. Studies by Aliakbari and Hemmatizad (2015) on motivation and de-motivation lead to findings which finally concluded that the students' gender was an influential element on students' motivation. Gender also said to vary students' language ability where females have a greater oral performance or verbal ability than males (Zafar & Meenakshi 2012, Motallebzadeh & Nematizadeh, 2011). In short, this study was conducted to identify the levels of motivation in learning English among the first-year students of UniSZA in general and also based on gender.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Second Language Learning

Language learning is different from language acquisition as although they are related to the same language, the processes have their own concepts and differences.

Language acquisition was typically related to the acquisition of the first language while language learning involves people learning a new language, whether it is a second language or a foreign language or even a third language.

Krashen (2013) however has come up with a very clear explanation in distinguishing the learning and acquisition processes of the second language. Language acquisition was defined as a subconscious process of picking up a language which during the process, people are unaware that they are acquiring the language but aware that they are using the language in communication. This process is similar to the acquisition of the first language by children as they are unconsciously learning the language. The acquisition occurs in an informal situation and involves implicit learning. The outcome of the process can be seen through the usage of the language in speech production. Language learning, on the other hand, known to be the conscious process of picking up language where the context is very formal and involves explicit learning. During this process, people are well aware that they are learning the language and it requires efforts from the learner. Based on the theory, language learning is believed to involve conscious and explicit learning of a language within a formal environment while language acquisition is known to be the unconscious and implicit learning of a language.

Although second language learning (SLL) and second language acquisition (SLA) have different individual meaning, Gardner (2006) stated that they are both interconnected with each other in relation to language learning motivation. The statement by Gardner (2006) which was “Language learning motivation, I mean the motivation to learn (and acquire) a second language” indicated that learning and acquisition are the processes involved in the learning process of the L2. The terms were defined separately only when being compared to the acquisition process of the L1.

Rattanaphumma (2008) agreed that SLL is affected by various aspects and Spolsky’s general model of SLL stated that the variations in the relationship between contextual factor, individual learner differences, learning opportunity and language outcome can lead to the difference in the success or failure of language learning. The model explained that the social context shapes learners’ attitudes which appear in learners as motivation. The motivation together with other personal characteristics such as age, personality, capabilities and previous knowledge will then be used by the learner in learning the language when given learning opportunities. The learning opportunities described by Spolsky as provided by the social context in either formal or informal form. The interplay between the learner and the situation determining, takes place when the learning process started. As a result, the outcome of the learning will be shown in linguistic or non-linguistic forms of outcomes from the learners.

In relation to this study, the theory explained the learning outcome due to individual characteristics such as motivation and gender which also known to be the individual differences. To conclude, SLL is the conscious process of gaining the L2 through a very implicit and specific context which also involved acquisition process through the input received by the learner.

2.2 Gender differences

Gender is one of the individual differences affect the second language learning (SLL) and second language acquisition (SLA). Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) claimed that age, sex, aptitude, motivation, learning styles, learning strategies and personality were also the affecting factors in language learning and acquisition. In relation to language ability, gender varied the language ability of the learner and similarly, Zhuanglin (1989) also believed that males and females were born with different linguistic advantages.

Oxford (1993) discovered that gender can have a significant impact on how students learn a language and Shakouri & Saligheh (2012) stated that gender does affect the language learning process especially in the choice of strategy by the learner. Ehrman and Oxford (1990) also supported the claim where observation on the strategies used by 1200 university students concluded that gender differences made a profound influence on language learning. These findings explained that different gender has different ability in acquiring L2 due to the fact that males and females have different characteristics such as the learning strategy in their SLL. The variations due to the difference in gender thus lead to the difference in the success of language learning.

Boyle (1987) stated that the female was typically superior to the male in nearly all aspects of language learning, except listening and vocabulary. Evidently, Motallebzadeh and Nematizadeh (2011) discovered that females did better in oral performance than males while Dafalla Ahmed (2015) found that there were significant differences between male and female's comprehension based on comprehension test done to Sudanese students.

Gender also seems to vary writing and listening skills as according to Jones and Myhill (2007), there was a slight difference between the writing comprehension of males and female. Most of the findings by the scholars suggested that males and females have advantages in the different aspects of language which makes them outshine the other gender. Ellis (2004) however stressed that the differences of language learning ability between males and females might also be due to cultural and sociological factors from the environment and not solely due to the differences in gender. The culture shapes the individuals' perception of the language and thus influenced their behaviour and actions toward the learning of the language.

Although gender varies the language ability of a learner, the statement, however, should not be generalised to everyone in all environments as suggested by Ellis and more studies should be conducted to reveal more concrete evidence. The statement also applies to the gender differences in relation to motivation in L2 learning. Oxford, Nyikos & Ehrman (1988) discovered that studies of individual language learner differences with regards to sex (biological) or gender have shown that females tend to show greater integrative motivation and more positive attitudes to L2.

Recent studies by Aliakbari and Hemmatizad (2015) on de-motivation also lead to a similar finding which finally concluded that the students' gender was an influential element on students' motivation. The researchers discovered that motivation and de-

motivation varies among males and females. Contradicting finding also discovered related to gender differences and motivation where Salem (2006) found no significant differences related to gender in motivation but discovered that, females somehow have more effort and a higher perception of the positive value of learning L2 than the males. Akram and Ghani (2013) also found no overall statistically significant differences between male and female respondents in their motivation to learn English as their L2. They claimed that males and females have more or less similar motivation in learning English.

Based on these contradicting findings by various researchers, it can be concluded that it is still not a fact that the motivation varies based on gender. It is also unclear that gender is an influential element in the success or failure of the learning of L2. However, it is possible that females may outperform the males in various aspects of language learning, but further studies need to be conducted for more concrete evidence.

2.3 Motivation

Besides gender, motivation is another type of individual differences which is essential in explaining the SLL and SLA. Motivation in general, is the forces that drive someone to do something or act in a particular way. It is also known as the inner drive of a person and the levels of motivation vary among individual.

Motivation has various definitions depending on the perspective or angle of the motivation and Dörnyei (2005) for example defined motivation as the aspect which was responsible for determining human behaviour by energizing it and giving it direction. Gardner (1985) however defined motivation specifically in the context of language learning where motivation was described as a combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language.

Jafari (2013) claimed that motivation is an important variable in examining the success of SLL as language learning is claimed as being facilitated when the learners are highly motivated. Engin (2009) also had a similar opinion when stating that motivation can greatly influence the students' ability to succeed from a study done towards the students of The University of Ataturk, Turkey. The study discovered close relationships between the successes in learning a L2, with the types of motivation. In addition, motivation plays a big role in SLL and teachers need to develop appropriate strategies to ensure that they are able to motivate the students. Degang (2010) agreed that motivation was described as vital in affecting language learning thus proved that motivation is really essential in language learning, especially in L2 learning

Motivation was also said to be closely related to language performance and evidently, a study on qualitative and quantitative data by Su and Wang (2009) revealed that there was a close relationship between motivation and students' English performance. Rifai (2010) and Orio (2013) also discovered the relationship between motivation and language performance where students whose English grade was above average have more motivation in learning English in comparison to those

whose English grade was below average. This is because motivation is believed to be the most important individual factor contributing to the achievements and proficiency of L2 as most students with a high level of motivation usually have better language proficiency and eventually have better language performance.

Furthermore, a research by Ababneh (2013) uncovered that learners with a strong internally driven motivation have better language proficiency than those who have strong externally driven motivation in learning English. The motivation that is initiated by the learners' inner self is prone to give more drive in learning the language than the motivation which originated from instrument or other external goals of the learner. Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) explained that under certain conditions, instrumental motivation can be a more beneficial drive. Financial goals, for instance, can be a highly effective motivator for language learning due to the perception that better English competency leads to a better and well-paid job. However, most scholars have a positive perception that integrative motivation is better for language learning due to the reason that the students' drive to learn is for the language itself and not towards the benefits of the language.

3. Research Methodology

The subjects of this study were 112 first-year students of UniSZA who had sat for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). They were selected through a non-stratified random sampling technique based on a chart developed by Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2001). Their motivation level in English learning was measured using the adapted version of the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) formulated by Gardner (1985). AMTB is a large battery of tests which measures a number of different aspects of language learning and according to Orfo (2013), it is one of the most influential methods for measuring motivation especially in language learning.

The questionnaire consisted of 3 groups of items known as the motivation intensity, the desire to learn English and the attitudes towards learning English. The items were specially designed to measure and determine the intensity of students' efforts in learning English, their desire to learn English and also their attitudes in learning English. Each of the group consisted of 10 questions and the students were given 30 minutes to respond to the 30 items based on four scales namely strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree.

The responses were scored and the overall score were referred to a bench mark which indicates the respondents' motivation level in learning English. The bench mark consisted of three ranges of scores which eventually specified the students' motivation level in learning English as low, moderate or high. A pilot test was conducted to test the questionnaire's validity and reliability to ensure the credibility of the instrument. The data gathered from the questionnaire were analysed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 21 application. The data were analysed using frequency distribution, mean scores and also the independent sample t-test analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The result showed that the first-year students of UniSZA had a high level of motivation in learning English. Table 1 showed the frequency distribution of the levels of motivation in learning English.

Table 1 Frequency Distribution of the Levels of Motivation in Learning English

Levels of Motivation	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Low	2	1.8
Moderate	12	10.7
High	98	87.5

The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that 87.5% of the respondents had a high level of motivation in learning English. Meanwhile, 10.7% of the students had a moderate level of motivation in learning English and 1.8% of the respondents had a low level of motivation in learning English. The high level the of motivation in learning English among first-year students in UniSZA supported the finding by Wimolmas (2013) where the researcher discovered that majority of the tertiary level students had relatively high motivation in learning English. One of the possible reasons for the first-year students in UniSZA to possess a high motivation in learning English was due to their positive attitudes towards the language learning process. Verma (2008) defined attitudes as a set of beliefs developed in a course of time in a given sociocultural setting. Positive attitudes in language learning hence referred to a positive set of beliefs about the language learning as a result of sociocultural influence on an individual. Students' positive attitudes could be seen in their actions and behaviours throughout the learning process as positive attitudes facilitated learning while negative attitudes would prevent the production of any result or outcome from the learning process. Moreover, students with a positive attitude were more active and engaged in the activities and task given by their language teachers. Al Othman and Shuqair (2013) believed that motivation of an individual influenced the level of dynamic and personal engagement in SLL. The students became more willing to participate as Thijs and Verkuyten (2009) believed that students with a positive attitude in SLL became emotionally engaged in activities and tasks by encouraging and supporting their peers in tasks completion. Additionally, they also became cognitively engaged in the activities and lessons through ideas and opinion sharing among their peers in the classroom.

Positive attitude in SLL also influenced students' effort in learning and participating in the learning process where Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) claimed that students with positive attitudes in language learning were more willing to put efforts in the learning process as they knew that it would be beneficial for them in their learning. Finn et al. (2014) in addition, stated that effort would allow a learner to hold some of the input which they were exposed to in their mind and formed explicit hypotheses about the relationship between items. Hence, people with more effort in SLL tend to have better comprehension and understanding about the lesson just as believed by Fenner (2011) that some people were not just "good at language" but

they were defined by the effort they put in the learning process and also how effective the learner could learn from the effort.

The second possible reason for the high motivation among the first-year students of UniSZA is due to the commitment and dedication of their secondary school English teachers. This situation reflected the role of the teachers in English learning which is to motivate the students in learning the language. The role and influence of the teacher in motivating students to learn a L2 were significant (Astuti, 2016). The teachers' teaching approach, communication skills and also time management were believed to be the key aspects to motivate the first year students in UniSZA in English learning.

The teacher's teaching approach was viewed to be one of the influential aspects of the teacher which greatly affect the students (Svobodova, 2015). Teaching approach or style became more than just a pedagogical aspect of teaching methodology as it required careful consideration by the teacher to help the students in language learning. Sheikh and Mahmood (2014) defined teaching style as a multidimensional phenomenon which explained how a teacher presented information, interacted with the students, managed classroom tasks, supervised coursework and socialised with the students.

Sheikh and Mahmood (2014) and Khandaghi and Farasat (2011) discovered that most English language learners favoured student-centered approach over teacher-centered approach. The student-centered approach aimed at students' domination in the learning process and promoted students' active involvement during the lesson. It also led to more adaptation of students in emotional, social and education domain in English learning. In addition, it was also necessary to use new teaching patterns and methods while considering students' interests and individual differences.

Besides the management of lesson, the teachers are also responsible to create a favourable and constructive learning environment which provides the students with freedom in learning (Vanhala, (2008). Mart (2011) however claimed that developing a learning environment which is capable of motivating students' language learning was not an easy task considering that every student learns differently in their own way. Nevertheless, Vialle (2000) and Mart (2011) mentioned that "In the formal world of the classroom, teachers hold an extreme position of power" (p.1). This highlighted the teachers' role in managing the classroom to improve the language learning process

Furthermore, a teacher should also manage a good rapport with the students as Williams and Williams (2011) mentioned that students received more benefits from the teachers they liked compared to the teachers they dislike. This is because English learning required the students to emotionally acknowledge the teachers in order for them to accept the information delivered by the teacher. Hanrahan (1998) asserted that the teacher-student interpersonal relationship was an important factor for student involvement in classroom learning. The researcher added that through interaction, the teacher affirmed the worth of the students and supported the autonomy in the students' learning.

Another reason for the teacher to become the cause of the high motivation of the first-year student in UniSZA was due to their English teacher's communication skill. Teachers need excellent communication skills as they have to deliver a clear instructions and explanations to the students. Piniel (2004) stated that a teacher's unclear explanations and instructions did not only cause feelings of apprehension but might also lead to students' de-motivation in the language learning process. For that reason, teachers need to have good communication skill in order to deliver effective lessons and also to continuously motivate the students in learning the language. Unclear instructions might prevent the information from reaching the students and unclear explanations might disturb the students understanding towards the lesson. This situation would cause problems in the learning process where the students might have misunderstandings towards the information delivered by the teacher.

Additionally, the secondary school English teacher's time management for the lessons and activities also influenced the students' motivation in learning the language. Heitzmann (2009) agreed that timing was very important for the teachers during the lesson as students needed enough time to understand the material and also to comprehend the lesson. For instance, extensive teaching and explanation might bore the students while a very brief and simple lesson might lessen the students' understanding towards the lesson. The secondary school English teacher for the first-year students in UniSZA must have practised good time management during the English lesson which causes the students to have a high motivation in learning English.

The result of this study also revealed that the female first-year students of UniSZA had higher motivation in learning English compared to the male students based on the means of scores from the questionnaire. Table 2 showed the means and standard deviations of the levels of motivation by gender.

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations of the Levels of Motivation by Gender

Gender	N	\bar{X}	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig.
M	34	2.71	.579	-2.092	110	.008
F	78	2.92	.268			

* $p < .05$ M= Male F= Female

The result of the t -test showed that female students obtained a higher mean score ($\bar{X} = 2.92$) compared to the male students ($\bar{X} = 2.71$). The t -test also revealed that there was a significant difference between the two means ($t(110) = -2.092, p = 0.008$). This finding hence affirmed that female students had higher motivation in learning English compared to the male students.

Narayanan, Nair and Iyyappan (2007) discovered a similar finding which suggested that female had a higher motivation level than the males. The finding thus illustrated the influence of gender towards language learning's motivation which was also

agreed by Aliakbari and Hemmatizad (2015). The difference in the motivation level between gender was due to several reasons such as the differences in language ability and also the language preference. Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) agreed that gender has a significant impact on English learning where males and females had different language ability. Babalola and Oyinloye (2012) mentioned that females had a greater verbal ability than the males and according to the scholars due to the females' choices in favouring prestigious or correct way of language usage which encouraged them to learn the correct standard form of the language.

Besides, females' articulation and grammar were also more precise and they consequently had a richer vocabulary than the males (Al-Rabai, 2010). Nikitina and Furuoka (2007) in addition, asserted that there had been many reports stating that girls tend to outperform boys in language learning. They also agreed with Powell and Batters which in 1985, claimed that the situation was due to the fact that girls conducted themselves differently from boys.

This situation, however, was not helpful in a mix gender classroom as the learning process must be able to cater both gender at the same time. Hence, due to the difference in language ability, it was suggested for the English teachers to be more particular in selecting the materials for the lesson to ensure that they were capable of facilitating both male and female students. The activities and tasks should also involve more collaborative tasks between the two gender to facilitate the learning.

Other than language ability, language preference was also another reason which influenced the motivation in learning English. Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) agreed that males and females had different preferences in language and both gender were likely to use linguistic devices differently. Language preference in English also influenced the students' interest for instance, in a mixed-gender classroom; speaking activities might interest the female students but might not interest the male students. The majority of male students might found communicative activities to be less interesting because they usually have less vocabulary and preferred short and direct sentences over a long and flowery sentence.

Al-Rabai (2010) claimed that females had a richer vocabulary than the males and favoured the prestigious or correct way of language. This situation encouraged the female learners to use the vocabulary to learn the correct standard form of the language. The male, on the other hand, might be reluctant to participate in the activity as their lack of vocabulary might interfere with their attempt to practice the language. For this reason, the teachers need to use the activities which could benefit both gender.

5. Conclusion

Second language learning has been agreed by many scholars to be greatly influenced by motivation and students with high motivation level tend to have a better English performance compared to those with low motivation level (Rifai, 2010). In this study, it was clear that the first-year students of UniSZA were highly motivated in learning English. This study also confirmed that there was a significant difference between male and female learners' motivation in English learning and this agreed

with Aliakbari and Hemmatizad (2015) and Narayanan, Nair and Iyyappan (2007). The findings of this study also helped English instructors especially those in UniSZA in lesson planning and teaching process. Future studies are recommended to be conducted in relation to motivation and SLL to provide more information regarding the matter.

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